JUN TAKAHASHI VS. JAN SVANKMAJER

How did you first come across Jan Svankmajer? What got the whole thing started?
JT: Somebody I know screened *Alice* for me. I guess that was the catalyst. Then I saw a couple of his short films, *Spiklenci*, I think, and *Othesanek*.

And this was all relatively recently, right?
JT: Yeah, about three or four years ago. Shortly after I saw the films, I went to the Czech Republic, a couple of different times, actually. I got to meet Svankmajer face to face on my second trip. Then when I visited last September, we finally had the chance to talk at length. Our first real meeting coincided with a major exhibition of his work, and he was kind enough to walk me through the whole exhibit, explaining everything personally. It was like a dream.

Well they say he's a dreamy guy. *(laughs)* Let me ask Svankmajer about the meeting. Why do you think Jun Takahashi and the Undercover studio decided to approach you?
JS: I know this will sound stupid, but I think it was fate. It just felt like the stars were in alignment. I mean that literally – our meeting was written in my horoscope. You see, I'm kind of an astrology person, although I don't quite know why. I just got out of bed one morning and started believing in it. Go figure. But I'm really into it now – in fact, I just had a new horoscope cast for me. I guess I like the way the horoscope always says all kinds of things, and how they're all vague enough to be true.
Anyway, the whole meeting with Jun was nothing I could have ever conceived of myself. It was straight out of my horoscope. My wife's death is another example of a horoscope prediction, although that one was a little more ambiguous: before Eva died last October, the horoscope suggested that my life was about to change in some major way.
My relationship with Jun started in earnest a couple of years ago when he called his runway show in Paris "an homage to Jan Svankmajer" and my work. Eventually I got wind of his plans for that show, but before I'd heard the first thing about it, my horoscope was telling me loud and clear that I would develop a relationship with fashion.
To tell you the truth, that was a pretty bizarre idea at the time, since my relation to fashion has always been a lot like my relationship with boomeranging or yodeling. *(laughs)* But just as I was thinking about calling my astrologer to complain that the thing was a fraud, somebody contacted me about the Undercover show. So there you have it: first came the prediction in the horoscope, then the call about the fashion show. Cause and effect. Right then I intuitively realized that my relationship with Jun was written in the stars. So to answer your question, the lasting significance of Jun contacting me is that it sealed my belief in astrology. *(laughs)*
Really, though, things turned out exactly the way the horoscope said they would. It's scary how accurate astrology can be.

Scary? So these uncanny predictions can be bad?
JS: Well, sure, bad things might be forecast, and they might come to pass, but life would be too boring to live in the first place if the fates were always good. The relationship with Jun is a good thing, and the horoscope in that case was very clear: "Ties will begin pulling you toward fashion." With Eva, of course, the situation was terribly sad, so I suppose one could call it a "bad" prediction, but the horoscope got it really… right. I mean, a while before she died my horoscope warned me that this was the time to start preparing a will. I knew my wife was sick of course, but I really had no idea that she would be taken as quickly as she was. So it was bad news, but was the prediction itself "bad?" Who can say?

Fair enough. But as accurate as the horoscope might have been on the fashion front, it only mentioned fashion generally, nothing about a designer from another generation on the other side of the world.

You weren't shocked when Jun first approached you from Japan?
JS: Not really. I'm in the Czech Surrealist Group, which has members older than me, as well as people in their 20s and 30s. So there was nothing particularly surprising about a younger designer taking an interest in what I do, at least not as far as his age. The key is that he wanted to communicate and so did I. That commonalty is more important than the age difference.
The same is true with the so-called culture gap. Conventional wisdom has it that countries each have innate – and, therefore, mutually exclusive – cultures, but I have never accepted that. In my opinion, culture is an essentially human faculty, and it continuously grows, without concern for which national borders it flows across.
Surrealism itself is a movement that transcends boundaries. It's important to understand that it is not simply transcendent art, but a movement that seeks to transcend, in this case the borders between nations. Ultimately, it works to eliminate them. That's why surrealism is best thought of as a global phenomenon. For example, I would find it easier to communicate with another surrealist who happens to be French than a fellow Czech animator my own age who didn't know or care about surrealism.

So Jun, we still haven't explored why you decided to reach out to Svankmajer-san. His influence on you is indirect, right? It's not as if you decided to express yourself in some certain way based on the effect some Svankmajer work had on you, right?
JT: That's right.

In fact, something closer to the opposite is probably true. You design something, and that's your own statement. Then you see a film or whatever that strikes a chord and you naturally relate to it. It becomes part of your own consciousness. So the "influence" is after the fact. Is that a reasonable explanation?
JT: Hmm. Difficult question. Who influences whom, and how much? Well… I remember some of the first Svankmajer works I saw had lots of interesting images of clothes. Not fashion – he's not involved in the field – but, as we've been discussing, there was some… some fundamental similarity. I can feel it, but I can't put my finger on it. So I suppose "influence" is the right word. I mean, there are lots of things I like, but they aren't influences because I don't necessarily relate to them in the way I do to Svankmajer. He just nails it for me. There is something, I don't know… essential about his work.

JS: I think he's talking about a shared sense of creativity, or imagination, or direction, or whatever you want to call that "essential something" between artists. It's too fundamentally intuitive to explain in any physical or scientific way. I guess we share an ability to perceive the existence of that "essential something." In that sense we have a kind of communication that has no need for language.
This is what I was getting at a few minutes ago when I was talking about culture transcending borders. We had a leader in the Surrealism Group for a long time who divided people into two personality types, which he called *sextonic* and *affectonic*. Jun and I are both *affectonics*. These are people who operate normally enough if – and only if – things continue on their appointed course and everything goes according to plan. But the second things get off track, they shake off all social control and just start doing whatever they feel like and saying whatever they want. People like us are walking contradictions: perfect gentlemen most of the time, but antisocial at heart.
Incidentally, the term as we used it doesn't have negative connotations. Small children are naturally *affectonic*. They know that there is a certain way that things are supposed to be, and as long as they're forced to behave accordingly, they are fine. However, they are easily drawn off the path, especially when they play off one another. I'll bet Jun and I had similar childhoods, often wandering into creative trouble.

Interview by Hiroshi Inada (EYESCREAM)

Courtesy of EYESCREAM magazine, August 2006

Translators: Mie Iwase & Kenneth Levin